

The Origins of the Cold War
1941–1949

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PART THREE: ASSESSMENT

8 WAS IT ALL INEVITABLE?

What was the Cold War about? When did it begin and when did it end? If the use of the term by the actors in the drama is adopted, then it began in 1947 and ended shortly after the Cuban Missile crisis of 1962. If the Cold War is understood to be the overt or covert antagonism which existed between the Soviet Union and the United States, between socialism and capitalism, between a collectivist, planned society and the pluralistic values of a market economy, then the Cold War began in October 1917 and ended with the collapse of the USSR in 1991. On the other hand, if the Cold War is seen as the period during which the overt antagonism between Moscow and Washington dominated world affairs, then it began in 1943 and ended sometime in the 1960s or even as late as the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. During this whole period of Soviet-American confrontation a parallel process was under way – the formation of blocs. The division of Germany and the splitting of Europe, and indeed the world, into two camps, was a *fait accompli* by 1955. From then onwards the two major political groupings competed for spheres of influence. It was as if the scramble for colonies by the European powers in the nineteenth century had taken on a new lease of life. The new ‘scramble’, however, embraced the whole world, and there seemed to be no room for neutrals.

The analysis set out in the preceding pages has concentrated on the years 1941–49, with some attention being paid to the important pre-1941 era. The emphasis throughout has been on Soviet-American relations, as they dominated the world scene from 1943 onwards. Great Britain was important before that date but its economic weakness meant that it had to rely increasingly on the United States. This caused resentment in London: for example, the Conservative MP Robert Boothby likened the terms the Labour government had been forced to concede in return for the \$3,750 million American loan to those accepted at Munich. To him the government was selling the ‘British Empire for a packet of cigarettes’

[*Doc. 15*]. In fact, however, the British government had little choice, for without American aid the British economy would have collapsed.

The defeat of Germany and Japan, leaving a vacuum in central Europe and the Far East, meant that a new international order had to come into being. The two countries which had contributed most to the defeat of the Axis powers, the Soviet Union and the United States, were presented with a golden opportunity to re-shape the political configuration of the globe. Never before had such a chance presented itself, never before had two powers so dominated the world. Their reactions to the rise of national socialist Germany had been different. The Soviet Union had indirectly aided the rise of Hitler, seeing him as the most extreme representative of finance capital, one who would so exacerbate social relations that he would eventually provoke a successful socialist revolution. But as German power increased, the Soviets became more alarmed. As the Soviet government was not ready for war, however, it came to an agreement with Berlin in 1939, which in effect divided Europe into two spheres of influence, leaving the rest of the world until later. Stalin's success lulled him into a false sense of security, and the German invasion of the USSR on 22 June 1941 came as a shattering blow. On several occasions the USSR was within a hair's breadth of military defeat, and it was only in 1945 that Stalin could be sure that the Red Army would actually occupy some German soil. These events increased endemic Soviet feelings of insecurity. If the pact with Germany had not saved the Soviet Union from attack, could any future agreement with a comparable power ever be relied upon to guarantee legitimate Soviet security needs?

The United States reacted quite differently to the rise of Nazism. Washington did not regard Germany's increasing influence and power as a threat to US interests. Even when Hitler launched the Second World War in September 1939 with his attack on Poland the United States held back. Had American public opinion had its way it is unlikely that Great Britain would have received any Lend-Lease assistance before the United States was actually at war. America was willing to extend Lend-Lease aid to the USSR after June 1941, but it was the foolish German declaration of war on the United States on 11 December 1941 which drew the Americans into active participation in the European theatre; otherwise they would have concentrated their attention on winning the war against Japan in the Pacific.

The United States drew three lessons from its experience. The first

was that appeasement does not pay; the Munich settlement of 1938 was a shining example of what to avoid. The second was that a totalitarian domestic policy produces a totalitarian foreign policy. If peace was to be preserved, following the defeat of the Nazis, Germany and the whole region previously under its influence would have to be won over to democracy, understood as American-style liberal capitalism. The third lesson was the need to extend the benefits of the open American society resting on a market economy in which protectionism, preference and tariffs had been removed. American foreign policy before 1941 had been isolationist. Had not the majority of the American people gratefully shaken off the dust of Europe from their feet? Since Europe was a mess it was important not to be sucked back into the maelstrom of conflict. Running parallel to this isolation was a streak of idealism. Rooted in Wilsonian ethics, it held that foreign policy had to be morally defensible. Not only had the United States to be right, it had to be seen to be right. It was a noble vision which eliminated spheres of influence and the use of force to settle disputes, and advocated the creation of a world authority to guarantee the security of all states and to mediate all international altercations. Although President Woodrow Wilson had failed to win over the American public to the support of this ideal, it lay deep in the consciousness of many American policy-makers.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt was a skilled expositor of the doctrine. The New Deal needed a touch of idealism in foreign policy to stimulate the American imagination during the days of debilitating struggle to right the economy. But Roosevelt was too much of a realist and pragmatist to believe that the rest of the world thought as America did. The United States could afford to be idealistic, for it was bordered in the north by Canada and in the south by Mexico, neither of which posed an economic, political or military threat. Europe's situation was totally different. The Soviet Union, for instance, had long been threatened on its western frontier, and the Soviet government, after its experience with Hitler, was determined to create a situation in which it would not be liable to attack from central and south-east Europe. Roosevelt appreciated this, and knew that after the defeat of Germany Soviet power could move into the vacuum created and might even extend to the Atlantic Ocean. He told Cardinal Spellman in September 1943 that the European countries would have to undergo tremendous changes in order to adapt to the Soviet Union. He saw no point in the United States and Great Britain fighting the Soviets. They had been forced

into a shotgun marriage during the war but, as he told Cardinal Spellman in 1943, he hoped that out of this would come a real and lasting partnership. Europeans would simply have to endure Russian domination, in the hope that in ten or twenty years they would be capable of living well with the Russians. Hence he did not see the USSR as a threat to US security or even practising a foreign policy which was antagonistic to US interests. The world was large enough to accommodate both of them. He set out to reach an agreement with Stalin personally, even if aspects of it ran counter to the interests of his British allies. Especially at Yalta he made plain to Stalin his mistrust of Churchill whom he suspected of seeking to keep the British Empire intact after the war. Roosevelt saw Stalin as an anti-colonial ally and therefore tried to win the cooperation of the Soviet dictator in planning the new, post-war world. His principal assumption was that peace-keeping would be the responsibility of the United Nations, and he regarded it as essential that the USSR should play an active role in this organisation, for fear that it would otherwise degenerate into an anti-communist grouping.

What could Roosevelt offer Stalin to convince him that his offer of cooperation was genuine? The Soviet leader had two criteria against which to measure the fine words of the Americans: recognition of a Soviet sphere of influence in eastern and south-eastern Europe and if possible in those countries which bordered the USSR in the Middle East and Asia; and American acceptance of the Soviet demand for reparations from ex-enemy countries as well as American help in reconstructing the Soviet economy. Stalin's two main concerns, in short, were security and money. Returning to what Stalin told Eden about declarations being algebra but agreements being practical arithmetic (with the Soviet leader favouring the latter), it is clear that the Soviet Union was willing to make any declaration the Americans wanted but expected some tangible rewards.

However, Roosevelt could not openly accede to Soviet desires in eastern and south-eastern Europe, since such behaviour would have flown in the face of Wilsonian doctrine. Possessed of an infinitely resourceful mind, Roosevelt was always seeking ways of squaring the circle, of engaging in *Realpolitik* or power politics abroad while giving the impression at home that his foreign policy was pure Wilsonianism. Henry Stimson once declared that trying to follow Roosevelt's thinking was like chasing a vagrant beam of sunshine. In his own mind, Roosevelt was quite willing to concede the Soviets a

sphere of influence, but the 7 million Polish voters in America – to take only one example of a powerful minority pressure group – were quite determined that Poland should not fall under the shadow of the Soviet Union. On the economic side, if Lend-Lease had been extended and the Soviets had acquired huge credits to purchase surplus American stock, the Soviet government would not have been so concerned about reparations. Had Roosevelt lived it is possible that he could have agreed a form of words with Stalin which would have tacitly conceded the Soviet sphere of influence and set in train the recovery of the Soviet economy using the vast surpluses available in the United States. The American administration knew that the US public would not tolerate troops staying very long in Europe, or America footing the bill for Germany's or indeed Europe's recovery. The US taxpayer would expect a return on any American capital exported.

The year 1945 was a turning-point. Stalin could not bring himself to believe the honeyed words flowing from Washington and used practical arithmetic to gauge American goodwill. He had various options open to him: isolation; an aggressive policy (stopping short of war) against Great Britain and the United States; encouragement to foreign communist parties to seize power or at least to undermine the market economies in their respective countries; or cooperation, which would mean agreeing to maintain the *status quo* in western and southern Europe. In the event, Stalin chose cooperation, but he proceeded warily and with the greatest caution, looking to deeds, not words, as proof of American intentions. It has to be remembered that western, including US, intervention between 1918 and 1920 had left a deep scar on the Bolshevik body politic. The Soviets took it for granted that, given the chance, the United States and the other capitalist powers would try to destroy the Soviet Union. Allied to this conviction was their ideological conviction that there could be no lasting settlement with the capitalist powers.

Roosevelt's death came at a critical moment in American-Soviet relations, for the inability or unwillingness of Great Britain and the United States to concede the Soviets a sphere in eastern and south-eastern Europe – something Stalin thought had already been accepted in principle by his wartime allies – led the USSR first to stabilise and then consolidate its position in that region. Yet every step in this direction provided ammunition in London and Washington for those who were having second thoughts about Soviet power and had little faith in Roosevelt's grand design. Clement Attlee, for instance, was already pessimistic about the

future of East–West relations in 1945, and Ernest Bevin’s suspicion of communists was well established. The British government was tied emotionally to eastern and south-eastern Europe. Speaking in the House of Commons on 20 August 1945 about the problems of Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria and Austria, Bevin stated that it was important to prevent the substitution of one form of totalitarianism for another [26]. The difficulty which the Soviets faced was that there was only a popular basis for a close relationship with the USSR in one country in the region, Czechoslovakia. Bulgaria came a close second, but in some of the other countries – for example, Poland – there was downright hostility to such a relationship.

At this difficult and delicate moment for the development of post-war relationships there was a new American President, Harry Truman, who needed time to work out his own ideas and meanwhile afforded his Secretary of State, James F. Byrnes, considerable leeway in policy formation. Byrnes wanted Soviet cooperation, but only on the basis that the US should be recognised as the stronger partner. His atomic diplomacy was not successful, and merely succeeded in convincing the Soviets that they should speed up their own atomic programme. Truman and Byrnes, indeed most politicians, overestimated the benefits which would accrue to the United States as a result of its atomic diplomacy. They also assumed that this monopoly would last a long time, despite warnings by scientists to the contrary. There was a feeling that when it came to sophisticated technology the Soviet Union could not match the United States. Yet in fact the USSR – helped by spies such as Klaus Fuchs – exploded its first atomic device in 1949. Even without the technological information it gained from spies, the Soviet Union would almost certainly have been able to construct the simpler type of atomic bomb by 1951. In fact, that year saw the successful test by the USSR of the more complex plutonium bomb. This rapid development of its own atomic capability, and the justified calculation that the United States would not actually use its atomic bombs, hardened Soviet attitudes. The longer Washington prevaricated over credits, the more suspicious Moscow became that America was not really interested in helping the Soviet Union. Byrnes’s attempt to prise concessions out of the Soviets in eastern and south-eastern Europe in return for deliveries of surplus US stock forced Moscow to decide between security and credits. It chose security, for its fear of potentially hostile powers on its frontiers was greater than its desire for rapid economic recovery aided by US technology.

The Soviets’ ignorance of the way in which American policy was

made and their inexperience in international diplomacy multiplied their misconceptions. Likewise the Americans, although adept at elaborating their own proposals, were quite unprepared when they ran into Soviet objections. Washington never tried to see the problems from Moscow's point of view. Its sources of information in the Soviet Union were poor and it only had the haziest notion of policy discussions in the Kremlin. Moscow, on the other hand, was swimming in information about American and British official thinking. Donald Maclean at the British embassy in Washington, to name just one example, had access to top-secret information and relayed it to the Soviet Union. In the light of the first-class information flow from London and Washington and elsewhere, and the genuine American desire in 1945 for cooperation based on mutual advantage, why did Stalin not make more of the opportunities offered? It may have been the acute awareness of Soviet economic weakness and American strength which led Stalin to adopt a safety-first policy. If the 'open world' economy came into being, American influence might well replace that of the Soviets in the latter's sphere of influence. As the hope of American credits on terms acceptable to the Soviet Union receded, so the Soviet need for increased reparations mounted. Yet the increasingly acrimonious discussions on the problem of Germany (including reparations) merely strengthened the hand of those Americans who were committed to the 'Riga axioms'. American policy consequently became a self-fulfilling prophecy. The Soviets, it was argued, did not want an agreement since they were bent on expansion. Give them eastern and south-eastern Europe and they would then start asking for the countries to the west. Containment was the logical response to this. It was enunciated in February 1946 but only openly became official policy a year later, with the formulation of the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan. These were necessary to construct the edifice of the Cold War, for they provided the United States with a world mission apparently based on Wilsonian idealism – yet one which, at the same time, promised to create the overseas markets necessary for the rapid expansion of the US economy.

Western fear of the Soviet Union played an important part in the origins of the Cold War. There were people such as General Lucius Clay and the journalist Isaac Deutscher who raised their voices against the prevailing wisdom, but in vain. They saw the Soviet Union for what it was, economically and militarily weak. Official misconceptions about the USSR's real strength mainly stemmed from ignorance of the Soviet Union, and here the Soviet obsession with

secrecy was counter-productive.

In 1945 agreement could have been reached, but in 1946 it became much more difficult. One of the American proposals for post-war Germany was the pastoralisation of the country – a proposal associated with the name of Henry J. Morgenthau, Jr, the Secretary of the Treasury. It envisaged reducing German industry to a level which would make it impossible for Germany ever again to become a threat to its neighbours. This option was attractive if large reparations to the Soviet Union were deemed desirable, but no agreement on it could be reached at Potsdam. The longer the powers haggled, the more pressing became the problem of what to do about the war-shattered German economy. In London and Washington there was increasing desire for a rapid revival of the German economy, since Great Britain was unable and the United States unwilling to sustain it for much longer. This was bound to raise concern in Moscow. In fact, it was in everyone's interests to reach an agreement on Germany, for once that had been achieved accord on other parts of the world could follow. Nevertheless, such was the importance of Germany to both sides that no one was willing to leave a vacuum. Each side feared that Germany would pass into the camp of its adversary. The Soviets assumed that the market economy would pull the country into the American orbit, while the Americans were apprehensive about the prospects of an all-German state going communist. France played a negative role throughout. It wanted a dismembered, divided Germany, and it needed reparations. Eventually, the only solution to the intractable European problem was to divide the continent into blocs and revitalise the Western economies as the surest way of resisting communism.

Mastny regards the Soviet Union's striving for power and influence far in excess of its reasonable security requirements as the primary source of the Cold War conflict. However, had Roosevelt made clear to Stalin the limits beyond which he could not stray, Stalin might have acted with more restraint. To Mastny, the West's failure to resist soon enough was an important secondary source of the Cold War [115].

Gaddis traces the Cold War to the American need to contain the Soviet Union after 1945. Given Soviet dominance of Eurasia, it was vital to prevent Moscow obtaining dominance in Asia and/or western Europe [57].

Leffler sees the Cold War as the legacy of the Second World War [95]. That conflict upset the international system, altered the

balance of power in Europe, shattered colonial empires, restructured economic and social arrangements within nations, and bequeathed a legacy of fear that preordained a period of unusual anxiety and tension. The national security policies of the Truman administration were an attempt to apply the lessons and cope with the legacies of World War II as much as they were an effort to contain the Soviet Union. The United States, by providing a security umbrella, acting as financial hegemon and promoting multilateral trade, helped stimulate unprecedented economic growth. Policy-makers also believed that the expansion of industrial power would drive a wedge between Russia and eastern Europe and wean the region away from Moscow. The Kremlin might eventually and gradually conform to international norms. Truman and his advisers believed the Cold War could be won. They were right.

Another way of looking at the origins of the Cold War is to concentrate on the economic weakness of Europe, the Middle East, south-east Asia and Japan. A major factor was the weakness of Great Britain. Instead of London becoming an effective ally of Washington in and after 1945, it rapidly became clear that Britain desperately needed US economic aid. This factor had an important impact on British thinking. London wanted to involve Washington more and more in European affairs. In the Middle East, British thinking was decisive. Britain was aware that it could not retain its control over the Egypt-Suez area without US military and economic help. It also needed protection for its extensive petroleum interests in the region. The Iranian crisis of early 1946 brought home to the United States the importance of bases in the Middle East. Washington accepted that British power had to be sustained in this region since this was in its own interests. In south-east Asia, the United States acceded to the wishes of the European colonial powers for the restoration of the old order.

In Germany, France vetoed all Allied attempts to treat Germany economically as a single unit. France's fear of a resurgent Germany dominated its thinking. In 1947 two-thirds of European trade was still on a bilateral basis. The inability of west Europeans to solve their own economic problems reduced their political self-confidence. Increasingly after 1945 they turned to the United States as their political, economic and military saviour. From a security point of view western Europe was incapable of defending itself. Hence the strategy of containment of the Soviet threat owes its conception to the European, not the American, mind. Churchill and later Ernest Bevin worked indefatigably to weld the United States and western

Europe together. The same pattern can be traced in Asia, where timorous allies clamoured for more and more American intervention in their region.

The Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan and, especially, the formation of NATO were articulated in the United States but were conceived in Europe. Had Germany and western Europe experienced a rapid economic transformation after 1945, much of Kennan's pessimism would not have arisen. The Americans became alarmed at the weakness of their allies and potential allies and exaggerated Soviet power. Geir Lundestad has coined the phrase 'empire by invitation' to explain the evolution of US global policy [103].

The Soviets were their own worst enemies. The despatches of US and British diplomats paint an unflattering picture of the Moscow leadership. A flavour of the view from the Kremlin (the British embassy overlooks the Kremlin) is provided by Frank Roberts, a brilliantly successful career diplomat. After observing the party Politburo at the opening session of the USSR Supreme Soviet, he reported on 30 April 1945:

The Group at the back with M.I. Kalinin are enough to make one shudder and fill one with considerable apprehension regarding future Soviet policy.... They are all tough, fat, prosperous individuals who might equally have come to the top in any other ruthless, totalitarian society such as those we are defeating in Germany and Italy. Andrei Zhdanov in particular might be a plumper and perhaps more humane version of Hitler himself. Lavrenti P. Beriia and George Malenkov ... give the impression of being at worst perverts and sadists and at best reincarnations of medieval inquisitors justifying every action on the principle of the end justifying the means [166].

Not the type of gentlemen, if that is the right word, in whom one would place great trust!

The Cold War is over, with America the victor. The decisive factor was economic. Stalin must bear much of the blame for the Cold War because he had it within his power in 1945 to fashion a working relationship with the United States. Neither Stalin nor Truman wanted a Cold War. Perhaps in 1945 both the Soviet and American leaders were too confident that their own system would eventually win. However, in the short term, because of the depredations of war, both felt nervous about the other's ability to steal a march on them. Stalin, although essentially a *Realpolitiker*,

was also influenced by Marxism. This held that an understanding with capitalist opponents would be transitory but useful until the next capitalist crisis broke out. This would place the Soviet Union in a good position to take maximum advantage of it. Given this, why did Stalin not take more risks to secure a working relationship? Ulam [155] regards Stalin's domestic insecurity as the major reason. He needed to cut his empire off from the outside capitalist world. Contact with capitalists would run the risk of undermining his internal control.

Could the Cold War have been ended earlier by deploying other policies? Was it necessary to build up such great strategic and conventional power? Everyone was aware that this increased risk-taking. Would Khrushchev or Brezhnev have become more amenable to American wishes without this relentless build-up? Since Khrushchev expected the victory of communism, beginning in 1980, this is unlikely. A Brezhnev goal was nuclear parity with the United States and he achieved this by the early 1970s. After that there was a furious arms race until 1985. By then the Soviet Union could no longer afford it and eventually it crippled the Soviet economy. All Soviet leaders understood the competition with capitalist powers to be economic. If Moscow could not raise labour productivity above that of the Americans or the Japanese, communism could not succeed. Kennan perceived that economic, not military, policy would be decisive. However, his counsel did not prevail, as America descended into anti-communist hysteria and McCarthyism. America had lost self-confidence. It was fortunate for the United States that at precisely that moment western Europe and Japan were beginning to recover their self-confidence, thanks to America's economic help. Eventually the Cold War benefited the West more than the East.